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PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRB #0718/01 1101043
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 201043Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3454
INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 3924
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2898
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 5459
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT PRIORITY 3126
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 4154
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS PRIORITY 8806
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA PRIORITY 1592

CONFIDENTIAL RABAT 000718

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DEPT FOR NEA/MAG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2016

TAGS: MO PBTS PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH ISTIQLAL PARTY LEADER

REF: A. 04 RABAT 01986

1B. RABAT 308

1C. RABAT 663 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/C Timothy Lenderking for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: The Ambassador met April 4 with Istiqlal party leader and Minister of State Abbas El Fassi at his residence over lunch. The Ambassador was accompanied by Polcouns, Poloff (notetaker), and Polles, while El Fassi was joined by Istiqlal Upper House Caucus Leader and Executive Committee member Abdelhaq Tazi, Executive Committee member and former Minister of Communications and Moroccan Ambassador to Brazil Larbi Messari, Executive Committee member Nizar Baraka, and Minister of Public Works and Transport Karim Ghellab. This is the third in a round of calls the Ambassador is making on political party leaders to discuss party proposals for a Western Sahara autonomy plan, the impact of the recently passed political party law, and party plans for the 2007 legislative elections. On the Western Sahara, El Fassi said as a last option it may be necessary for Morocco to move forward with implementing autonomy, even if all parties have not negotiated a final solution. Commenting on CORCAS's role in the consultation process, he explained that the council in his opinion represents the views of Sahrawi tribes, not the direct views of the people. He added that the manner in which members were selected, not elected, to CORCAS will result in some contesting the process. El Fassi said Istiqlal is looking forward to the 2007 legislative elections, and is in the process of focusing its efforts to gain votes from the Moroccan population living abroad. Commenting on the recently published IRI poll on Moroccan political parties, El Fassi said the poll was "surprising" and "an event" for Morocco, but claimed that Istiqlal was not worried about the results, which projected the Islamist PJD as the leading political party. Clearly concerned that such a poll had been released, he added that the Moroccan population may interpret the poll's results as implicit support from the U.S. for the PJD. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

Autonomy: Possible Next Steps

12. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's inquiry, El Fassi, who visited the Western Sahara in March, explained that Istiqlal, in collaboration with the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and the Socialism and Progress Party (PPS), submitted

recently to the Palace a joint memorandum on autonomy for consideration. While not providing many details on the contents of Istiqlal's proposal, El Fassi noted that the plan supported the key principles of the palace. Regarding the likelihood of a final solution to the Western Sahara conflict, El Fassi said Istiqlal believes at a certain point, and as a last option, it will be necessary for Morocco to move forward on implementing autonomy for the Western Sahara, even if this means doing so unilaterally, without a negotiated solution by all parties. The conflict has gone on for too long, could not continue indefinitely, and has drawn on many of Morocco's resources, he explained. Moreover, he said, it was clear the King had no intention of ceding any territory from the Sahara. El Fassi also commented that Istiqlal's "strong" relationship with the U.S. is a strategic decision on Istiqlal's part.

¶3. (C) On the Royal Consultative Council for Sahrawi Affairs (CORCAS), El Fassi and the other Istiqlal members appeared to be supportive of the council's establishment and optimistic on the role CORCAS can play in the consultation process. El Fassi, however, noted that CORCAS in his analysis is a council that in essence represents the views of Sahrawi tribes, and not the direct views of the people. When asked if differing views on autonomy, including those opposed to autonomy, are represented on the council, El Fassi argued that CORCAS represents a wide range of different perspectives on autonomy -- of women, youth, NGOs -- because the members were "well-chosen." On this note, El Fassi acknowledged that by the very nature of the selection process for CORCAS members, (i.e. being selected, not elected) there will be people who will contest this process.

Istiqlal Preparing For 2007 Elections

¶4. (C) El Fassi said Istiqlal is looking forward to the elections, noting the party has 220,000 loyal supporters whom they can count on come election time. However, El Fassi said there is always a "but" and in this case the "but" is that Istiqlal would like legislation to move through the government more quickly. He gave the example of a 1993 legislation on national heritage that is still "blocked" by the government. El Fassi noted that situations where the government has blocked legislation has decreased considerably since King Mohamed VI has taken the throne. Morocco is a "work in progress," but moving in the right direction, he said.

¶5. (C) While on the topic of the 2007 elections and in a likely jab at the PJD, El Fassi expressed Istiqlal's sentiments towards the Islamist party, saying it is impossible for a credible political party to be both "American" and "anti-American" at the same time. He explained, however, that Istiqlal has always enjoyed friendly relations with other political parties, including the PJD. He said the party does not have friendly relations with parties that do not have autonomy over their own actions. As an example, El Fassi claimed that the Berber Popular Movement (MP) party (now part of the Popular Movement Union (UMP) party) was created by the Palace in 1977 to counter the growing influence of the Istiqlal party. El Fassi reiterated that Istiqlal will not deal with political parties that "do not make their own decisions."

¶6. (C) El Fassi also confirmed that Istiqlal is in the process of establishing branch offices overseas with an eye towards the 2007 elections. According to El Fassi, Istiqlal has or will soon have offices in Paris, Rome, Madrid, and Brussels. These offices will help spread Istiqlal's message to the Moroccan communities in each respective city, but will also serve as a base from which Istiqlal can attract potential supporters for the 2007 elections, he said. (Note: the 2007 elections will offer the first opportunity for overseas Moroccans to vote, per an announcement by the King in late 2005).

17. (C) On the recent passage of the political party law, El Fassi expressed Istiqlal's support for the new law. According to El Fassi, the new law is "good" because it prohibits parties from being based on religious, regional, or ethnic allegiances. He noted, however, that the new law is unlikely to dramatically rearrange the political environment in Morocco.

IRI poll: Results May Create Misperceptions

18. (C) Commenting on the recent International Republican Institute (IRI) poll summaries of which appeared in the March 18 issue of Moroccan French-language weekly *Le Journal* (and the subject of reftel B), El Fassi said that he, and Istiqlal, found the poll "surprising" and somewhat of "an event." He was clearly disturbed that such a poll, in a country not accustomed to political party polls, had appeared in the press. Conveying the opposite by raising the issue, El Fassi said he was not disturbed by the results. He said the poll was incorrect in forecasting a greater degree of popularity for the PJD; Istiqlal is the most popular party in Morocco, El Fassi said. According to El Fassi, polls are probably used in Morocco as indicators of public mood, most likely by parts of the government, but the results are never made public. He noted Istiqlal's belief that the results of the IRI poll "are nowhere close to the reality," while expressing concerns that the poll lacked a scientific base. In an effort to counter the poll's results, El Fassi explained that it was Istiqlal that was "the winner" of the 2003 local elections. He added that Istiqlal's reach extends throughout Morocco, covering both rural and urban areas, and as such the party does not give much credence to the poll results. According to El Fassi, when he speaks to rural constituents there are usually 1,000-2,000 supporters in the crowd at each event, noting that they stay throughout the speech demonstrating their unwavering support for the Istiqlal party.

19. (C) El Fassi added that although Istiqlal is not

troubled by the IRI poll results, the Moroccan population may react differently. El Fassi explained that the IRI poll creates a certain "worry" because the previous polls (both done by foreign NGOs) that appeared in the run up to the 1997 and 2002 legislative elections showed Istiqlal as the likely front runner. It is surprising, he explained, that now a poll done by the most powerful country shows PJD as the likely winner. El Fassi expressed his party's concern that the Moroccan population may interpret this as implicit support by the U.S. for the PJD. People may think this is what the international community wants, he said. The Ambassador stressed that the poll was meant to be internal and for IRI's use with political parties, and was not meant for the publication in the Moroccan press. It was not an official US poll nor should it be interpreted as such.

Istiqlal's Civil Society Efforts

110. (C) According to El Fassi, Istiqlal was the first Moroccan political party to encourage the work of civil society on a broad range of issues in Morocco. He explained that Istiqlal has contributed to the creation of numerous NGOs in Morocco, but insisted that despite Istiqlal's role in their creation the NGOs are completely independent to create and execute projects. He added that these NGOs have never worked under the banner of the Istiqlal party. El Fassi gave the example of the Moroccan Scout Organization, created in the 1960s, that has contributed to the education of Moroccan youth, but is not a tool the party uses to recruit new members. El Fassi also expressed concerns that U.S. aid to NGOs focuses too much on larger, more well-known NGOs, rather than NGOs like the Moroccan Scout Organization.

Riley